



Matthew Johnson, *Moment*. 40 m of LED light panels in the lobby of the Monument building, Sydney.

Johnson's use of the grid illustrates his point. In the 90s, he made paintings comprising a rectangular arrangement of CD boxes, each box painted a brilliant jewel tone. Cheaper than canvas, the blank CD box was a perfect vehicle for his orchestrations of colour, and the grid was simply an after-effect of his arrangement. The grid, of course, has a well documented history in modernism but Johnson is less interested in its historical weight than in what it allows him to do. As a template for marking up the canvas in his current work it resolves questions of form, line, and composition, concentrating Johnson's aesthetic choices on colour.

Of all painting's components, colour is the most subjective and mutable. Johnson works intuitively here, although he acknowledges reading colour theory when he was younger and books by colour scholar **John Gage** jostle for space on his bookshelves amid old dictionaries and **Ovid**. Johnson can use colour in a way that puts legibility in doubt; vision itself seems to dissolve. In *Between the Sea and Sky* 1, 2, 3 (2001), for example, three canvases trace modulations of blue in soft fat discs, each blob of colour reading like a unit of visual information. These bits of information never cohere, they stay discrete. If there is a landscape reference here, it's one only produced through film in those moving images that, cornily, pull focus on water's dappling or willfully fuzz nighttime street lights in jazzy city symphonies. Over time, as the orbs of colour in Johnson's paintings have grown smaller, and the grid tighter, the number of bits of information on his canvases has increased so that what we get now is not a cinematic "grain" but the glowing pop of pixels. These too stay discrete.

Johnson's "little things" – the interplay between two greens, the way light can fudge tones – are getting bigger, taking him beyond painting to architectural commissions. In conjunction with Wood Marsh Architects and Multiplex in Sydney, he recently completed a large scale LED work that allows him to program colour changes through what he calls "an intelligent light source." Perhaps not surprisingly, the end result which is installed in a lobby, produces "something like a shimmer of nature." In other projects he is transcribing the undulations of late afternoon light on to brick patterns, and developing interior paint treatments based on principles of changeability and variation. For Johnson there's no conflict here even if it does take him away from the canvas. Thinking about the contingency of light and colour, he says: "If I can achieve the same results differently, I'm not afraid to do other things beside paint." ■

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Matthew Johnson's exhibition *Peregrination* will be at Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne from 4 to 22 October 2005.